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Chinese authorities on alert as SARS breaks out again

China is on high alert following a fresh outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The index case is a 26 year old female laboratory researcher from Anhui province who worked for two weeks at the Chinese National Institute of Virology in Beijing, which is known to be investigating the SARS coronavirus.

The researcher, who developed symptoms of SARS on 25 March, subsequently infected her mother, who died, and a 20 year old nurse in a Beijing hospital where she was being treated. In turn the nurse is suspected of having infected her mother, father, aunt, and a fellow patient. A 31 year old laboratory researcher who also worked at the virology research laboratory is also suspected of having been infected. Almost 1000 people are in quarantine or under close medical supervision.

The World Health Organization has questioned why the index case was not immediately isolated when she developed a fever and why she was allowed to travel several times on trains while showing symptoms of SARS.

WHO has sent a team of bio-safety experts to the laboratory, which is currently closed.

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

Human Tissue Bill could jeopardise research, scientists warn

The British government is ignoring concerns of the scientific community about the potentially harmful effects of a draft law governing the retention of human tissue, the Royal Society said this week.

The Human Tissue Bill, which is currently under consideration in parliament, aims to set out ethical guidelines for medical researchers using human tissues, and tighten up procedures for obtaining consent from



Where doctors, actors, and athletes meet on equal footing

This portrait of Professor George Alberti by June Mendoza is one of more than 200 portraits in this year's exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters at the Mall Galleries, London.

Professor Alberti, past president of the Royal College of Physicians, is rubbing shoulders with, among others, Monty Python actor Terry Jones, astronomer Patrick Moore, and Olympic rower Matthew Pinsent.

Other members of the medical profession who feature in the exhibition are Professor Peter Hutton, president of the Royal College of Anaesthetists, and Professor John Temple, president of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. Both have been painted by Keith Breeden, who is a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters.

The exhibition is open daily to the public from 29 April to 16 May (except 1 May), from 10 am to 5 pm (till 7 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays).

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

patients for the use of such tissue. The bill was developed in response to events at Liverpool's Alder Hey Hospital and the Bristol Royal Infirmary, where organs from deceased children were kept for research without parental consent.

Lord May of Oxford, president of the Royal Society, said the measures in the bill were "like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut." The legislation makes no distinction between tissue samples taken during routine diagnostic tests and the removal of organs during postmortem examinations. "The prohibitive amount of bureaucracy that could be generated by the need to obtain consent for individual tissue samples would impact on teaching and lead to reduced levels of vital research into understanding diseases such as cancer, heart disease, Parkinson's, and vCJD [variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease]," Lord May said.

The Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust have also expressed concern.

Stephen Pincock *London*

Report clears Labour party of fault in purchase of vaccines

The Department of Health has been criticised for delays in upgrading the way it procures vaccines, which have cost the NHS an estimated £25m (\$44m; €37m) in the past three years.

But it has been cleared of any wrongdoing in awarding a £32.5m contract to a pharmaceutical company at a time when the chief executive made a £100 000 donation to the Labour party.

The department had been aware of deficiencies in its pro-

curement procedures since they were first highlighted in an internal audit conducted in 1997, says a report from the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. But it took three further internal reviews over the next three years, and two external reviews carried out in 2001 and 2002, for any action to be taken to tackle them, says the report.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Procurement of Vaccines by the Department of Health can be accessed at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/committee_of_public_accounts.cfm

Quarter of hospitals not ready to comply with working time directive

A substantial number of hospitals will be unable to comply with the European Working Time Directive in acute medicine when it becomes law in August this year, says a survey published this week by the Royal College of Physicians.

The survey of senior physicians at acute hospitals in England and Wales found that 23% will probably or definitely not be able to comply with the forthcoming directive, which rules that junior doctors must not work more than 56 hours a week. In addition, doctors are not to work more than 13 hours in any 24 hour period and are to take an 11 hour break before and after such a shift. Compliance would require virtually all junior doctors, including all doctors up to and including the specialist registrar grade, to switch to 13 hour "full shifts."

It is the lack of the experienced "middle grade" doctors (specialist registrars or staff grades)—the key staff involved in out of hours acute care—which is the crucial impediment to compliance, says the survey.

Debashis Singh *London*

Staffing Levels in Acute Medicine in January 2004—the Lead-Up to the EWTD can be accessed at www.rcplondon.ac.uk